

# 1919: The RAF Biggin Hill mutiny

A short history of the victorious rebellion of British servicemen in the air force who were living in appalling conditions, soon after World War I.

This dispute was in many ways typical of the smaller struggles of the wave of mutinies which swept the British Armed Forces towards the end of World War One. The 500 Royal Air Force men of the Wireless Experimental Establishment at the South Camp of the famous 'Battle of Britain' airfield at Biggin Hill had been living in absolutely appalling conditions. Most of them slept in tents, the camp was a sea of mud and all the duck-boards and other stealable fuel had been burnt to obtain warmth in the freezing weather. The dining hall was a canvas hangar with its roof in shreds. The men had to eat in a morass of three inches of mud. Food was prepared in a cookhouse which was an open, rusty shed. Matters were made worse by the officious attitude of the authorities.

One evening in January, after a particularly foul meal, the men held a meeting. They had already complained many times to the authorities, without result. The meeting decided overwhelmingly in favour of strike action. The 'Red Flag' was sung and there were calls for a more active and radical policy, including a call for a march down Piccadilly smashing all the windows en route. These proposals were defeated.

The next morning no one turned out for duty. When the orderly officer tried to discover what was happening he was turned away from the dining hall by a sergeant and two men who refused to recognise his authority. The men removed magnetos from all vehicles in the camp, including those belonging to civilian contractors. Support came from the men of 141 Squadron of the RAF stationed in the neighbouring North Camp, who refused to intervene on the side of the authorities. The strike committee was in complete control.

A deputation was sent to the CO, Colonel Blanche (the new RAF ranks had not been fully introduced) and presented the following demands:

1. No man to be victimised.
2. Unless we receive a satisfactory answer from the Commandant we will put our case before Lord Weir. I.e. our deputation will proceed to his quarters.
  - (a) The men state that when they go "sick" the Medical Officer says that their complaints are due to the disgraceful conditions of the camp food and sanitary arrangements.
  - (b) Names of the men who can bear witness to the above statement can be supplied if necessary.
  - (c) We demand that Major --- shall be dismissed from this unit.
  - (d) Leave to be carried on in the normal way.
  - (e) The men demand that they leave the camp until it is put into a habitable condition by the civilian employees.
  - (f) Temporary release of those men who have jobs waiting and those who want to get jobs pending discharge. While the men are at home demobilisations must continue, and the men be advised by letter or telegram.
  - (g) Abolition of work on Saturday afternoons and Sundays.
  - (h) Restrictions placed on Y.M.C.A. to be removed, prices in canteen to be lowered and a full explanation given as to what happens to P.R.I. funds.
  - (i) Efficient transport to be provided for officers, NCOs and men.

3. Grievances.

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*Sanitary:*

(a) Wash-house - only 5 basins for 500 men.

(b) Wet feet - no gum boots issued.

(c) Dirty and leaking huts.

(d) NO BATHS.

(e) Inefficient latrines.

*Food:*

(a) Shortage.

(b) Badly cooked.

(c) Dirty cook-house staff.

(d) Dining Hall in a disgraceful condition.

(e) Fully trained cooks should be substituted for present inefficient youths.

THESE DEMANDS TO BE CONCEDED BY NOON TODAY.

Blanchy offered to accompany the delegation to the Area HQ at Covent Garden to support their case! The men agreed, and the magnetos were replaced in a sufficient number of vehicles to transport the delegation. Meanwhile the rest of the camp remained on strike. The Area second in command was shown around the camp by the strike committee, and the outcome was that the whole camp was immediately sent on leave for ten days, during which time conditions were drastically improved and the other demands largely conceded. When the strike ended there were no victimisations. This limited but solid struggle had met with complete success.

*Source: RAF Biggin Hill by Graham Wallace, Putman, 1957*

*Edited from Mutinies, by Dave Lamb, which is extensively footnoted*